Breathe For Me by BlackStar3991

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Summary:

"The nightmares are recurring since the whole Upside Down clusterfuck started, and mostly, he thinks, he’s got this shit handled. Mostly."

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Steve has to deal with the anxiety resulting from the Upside Down, and Billy helps him through it.

(Sequel to my ongoing series, but can be read as stand-alone if you ignore some mentions of previous fics, lol)

Breathe For Me

Author's Note:

> I have no idea how schools work on the USA, but TV and movies have led me to believe that one can basically walk out at any given point. So that's what happens, lol
> If that's too inaccurate, just overlook it for the sake of the fic

It's been almost two weeks since that night, and their truce seems to hold. Billy hasn't come to Steve yet (which is a good thing, right? Means he's not getting hurt... Right?), and it's not like they were hanging out or anything. Billy would still tease him during basketball practice and bump into him on the corridors, but now it feels... friendly? Somehow? Maybe it looks unchanged for people watching, but Steve can see that there's no venom to it anymore. So he's taking the win, even if it's a slow one.

But today he really wishes they weren't that slow. The nightmares are recurring since the whole Upside Down clusterfuck started, and mostly, he thinks, he's got this shit handled. Mostly. This morning, when darkness wasn't even gone, he woke up suffocating on screams that didn't dare leave his mouth. Cold sweat drenched his body, and every time he closed his eyes again, he would see vivid images of the kids being eaten by demodogs or lying in pools of their own blood. His parents were back home, but they might as well not be, for all the comfort their presence brought. So Steve just waited, not feeling capable of doing much else, until it was time to get up for school.

He has no false hopes on the day getting any better – that sense of dread, like a void growing in the pit of his stomach, is there to stay. Steve feels lonely, and realizes he doesn't really have anyone he can talk to. He knows the kids got his back, but they have been through a lot as well. Steve doesn't want to drop his own shit on them while everyone is still healing; they deserve to be just kids now. And he is on good terms with Nancy and Jonathan, but... It's not like they're intimate enough that Steve would go pouring his heart out to them. Tommy and his former friends are completely out of question.

Weirdly enough, that leaves... Billy fucking Hargrove. Steve is still surprised at that turn of events, but he finds himself wishing he could talk to Billy.

Well into his second period, Steve is no longer paying attention to anything. He just can't focus anymore, every single noise in the classroom makes him almost jump out of his skin, and he can't think properly. The best he can do is to focus on his own breathing, trying to ease the nausea that is welling up inside him.

As soon as the bell rings, Steve shoves his belongings in his backpack and all but runs out of there. Passing the hallways, he seems fucking invisible – which makes him feel like shit but kind of relieved. He may want company, but too much attention right now would only make things worse. Steve can feel his heart beating on his throat and the edges of his vision start to blur. Clutching the straps of his backpack like his life depends on it, he looks around and, hoping no one notices, slips out of the building while everyone goes about their business.

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After that Friday night, Billy is on new grounds here. He wants to trust Harrington, but he can't help being wary – trusting isn't really his thing. It was also embarrassing, breaking down like that and dropping his guard. Steve fucking saw a part of him that no one ever had, and that scares the shit out of him. People who get a peek into Billy Hargrove's mind usually got themselves a nice black eye for their troubles, but for some reason, Steve is getting to him. So, while he doesn't really come closer yet, he leaves that door open; he teases and tries to get Steve's attention, hoping the other boy notices the white flag Billy's been waving this past few days.

Billy barely admits it to himself but, when he leaves his classes, he always discreetly searches for Steve among the students in the halls. Today after second period he is fiddling with some shit on his locker, pretending he has something to do, when he sees Steve passing by. Billy is about to bump on him "accidentally" and say something snarky, when a deep frown appears on his face – the guy looks like crap. The bags under his eyes stand out on his pale face, and he looks like he's about to cry or puke or both. Not sure what to do, Billy half
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hides himself behind the locker's open door, quietly waiting for Steve to walk past him and, after a moment's consideration, follows him.

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Steve walks out the door and doesn't know where he's going. Passing a hand through his hair, the controlled breaths he was trying to take start to get more and more rapid, and his eyes start stinging. Suddenly feeling too exposed during such a freakout, even alone outside, he starts panicking even more. Steve half runs half stumbles to the side of the building, to a spot he where couldn't be seen from the parking lot. Dropping his backpack unceremoniously to the floor, he stands facing the brick wall, supporting himself on it with both hands. Tears start to run down his face unbidden, and it's like he can't even control his own body anymore.

"What the fu....", he breathes out, interrupting himself as he breathes in again.

"Harrington?" a voice beside him asks, hesitant.

Steve's eyes go wide in surprise as he sees Billy, and he steps away from the wall, turning his face away. Why did he had to find him now? Like this, of all moments? He has to get his shit together – how will Billy come to Steve for help if he sees this fucking mess? Mentally yelling at himself to act cool, Steve feels like he can't breathe anymore. It's like the more he tries, the harder he fucks up. With a sob half escaping his throat, he gets dizzy and has to lean on the wall again, trying to face down and away from Billy.

"Woah! It's okay, man." Billy sounds startled by all this, but he isn't laughing and that's good enough for the moment "Calm down."

"Really? Why didn't I fucking think of that?!" Steve snaps back without meaning to, surprising even himself by managing a whole sentence right now.

Billy takes a small step back, making Steve despair a bit more - the last thing he wants to do is fuck up whatever he's building with Billy. He tries to apologize but all he manages is a dry croak.
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“I know, sorry. Shit.” Billy mumbles nervously. “I’m coming closer, okay?”

Relieved that he didn’t go away, Steve quickly nods. Still not looking up, he can see Billy move, and hears his voice right next to him asking:

“You think you’re gonna be sick?”

Steve considers for a second before shaking his head.

“No. Kinda wish I would.”, he adds on a shaky voice “Like that’d make it better.”

“Alright” Steve feels a warm hand hesitantly coming to rest on his shuddering back “Hm, is this okay?”

He nods in return, and Billy’s hand starts to run soothingly up and down his back.

“Pretty boy, breathe for me, okay? Slower, I mean. You’re hyperventilating, and that’s making you dizzier.”

With a sniffle, Steve gives another nod and tries to do what he’s told. Billy’s voice is uncharacteristically calm. Used to hear it only in threatening snarls or snarky comebacks, Steve almost doesn’t recognize it with such concern and friendliness.

“I know it feels like you’re fucking dying, but it’s just a panic attack, alright?”, then he adds a bit faster, correcting himself: “I mean, not ‘just’ like it doesn’t matter… I… The point is, you’re gonna be okay.”

“Yeah… I know” Steve answers in an exasperated murmur. With a long sigh, he finally lifts his head and fidgets away from the wall, immediately regretting it when Billy’s hand drops from him. He passes both hands on his wet face, a few stubborn tears still finding their way down. “Goddammit.”

With Billy watching him, Steve comes to the wall and leans his back on it, sliding till he’s sitting on the ground. He props his arms on his knees and lowers his head to hang between them, closing his eyes. Steve hears a quiet shuffle of feet followed by a warmth coming from

his right side, where Billy is sitting close enough to touch. His hand finds its way back to Steve, this time skin to skin, as it comes to rest on the back of Steve's neck.

"Hey" he says with a light squeeze and low voice "Breathe, remember?"

Taking some deep breaths, Steve is pretty sure he feels a thumb slowly caressing his skin for moment, right before Billy slides his hand down to Steve's shoulder blades and asks:

"So, you've had these before?"

"Not like this" hoping Billy will maintain the contact, Steve sits up a bit more.

Billy nods, as if understanding, and in a very natural move he slings an arm around Steve's shoulders, gently tugging him closer. Steve lets himself lean on Billy's side, his heart beating faster again when he catches Billy's smell of shampoo and faint smoke. They sit like this for a few minutes, breathing in silence. Drying his face again, this time hopefully for good, Steve speaks almost on a whisper:

"You really knew how to help" he feels Billy tense up for a second, but the boy doesn't move away. If anything, his arm might be holding on just a bit tighter.

"Well", Billy answers slowly, as if measuring his words "just did what I wish someone had done for me."

Aware that this information, small as it seems, contains a world of trust, Steve wants to convey just how much all of this means to him. But, also aware that voicing certain things right now might scare Billy away, Steve bumps his head lightly on Billy's shoulder and whispers:

"Thank you."

"Any time"

Author's Note:

It took me forever to start writing fanfics and now I can't stop, send help!

(Actually, fuck help - send comments, lol)